# Action Research：Japanese high school−aged students’difficulties in English oral communication

# Action Research: Japanese high school-aged students' difficulties in English oral communication

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## Introduction

This paper arose out of concerns amongst my colleagues and myself whilst teaching adolescents several years ago in a private English conversation school conducted once a week in the evening after school. This was of major concern to us as our students had difficulties with oral communication, while our programs' only goal was, "to provide students with an opportunity to further his/her studies in English conversation in addition to helping him/her become more culturally internationalised" (*XYZ school's Teacher Manual, pi). (Please note, *XYZ schools' and students names are pseudonyms).

## Theories and Concepts Outline

In this outline of related theories and concepts, I will examine three sections: a) What has been done; b) What has been left out; and c) Conceptual framework of this study.

### a) What Has Been Done

External factors and motivation shape individuals' and societies' attitudes toward foreign language education (McHugh 1989). How do these relate to my class?

I will first examine some of the external factors within Japan's socio-cultural context, in order to highlight the concerns addressed in this paper.

Japanese society has been described as, high-density homogeneous; multi-layered; vertical; group-orientated, witha uniformity-emphasis, although recently, this is slowly changing. Historically, there has been, "virtually no major influx of immigrants over the last 1,000-plus years" (Tanaka (ed.) 1990). This isolation is a significant factor in the popularity of of learning English. Strong group emphasis is illustrated by the Japanese words, "honne" and "tatemae." "Honne" is what a person really thinks (individuals' voice) and "tatemae" is the groups' position (groups' voice). Very often, precedence is given to the group "tatemae" position, even if not entirely abandoning personal "honne" (Tanaka (ed.) 1990). Further strong evidence of group-orientation is seen in the the wide-spread school-uniformed adolescents' culture. Pressure to conform is shown by the Japanese proverb, "deru kui wa utareru," (the nail that sticks up gets hammered down). The ultimate punishment for non-conformists is, "murahachibu," (ostracism) (Tanaka (ed.) 1990). Sadly, every year there are cases of adolescent suicides, usually caused by severe bullying related to extreme peer group pressure and group "tatemae."

How do adolescents progress through this socio-cultural context? As they usually do in other cultures around the world: through that strongest and most influential of all social institutions, the school.

Even before adolescence, sometimes as young as pre-kindergarten, childrens' lifestyles are determined by their (or rather their parents') academic aspirations. To enter a "good" company, students must graduate froma "good" university ... from a "good" high school ... "A good high school is one witha high percentage of students who not only go on to university but are able to enter the prestigious schools" (Tanaka (ed.) 1990:179). This elitist function and image still permeates contemporay Japanese society. Entering a prestigious university is extremely com-

petitive and difficult, and often the best high schools teach the three year curriculum in only two years. The final year is devoted to preparing for university entrance examinations. Further, Japanese use the term, "yonto-goraku" (four-pass, five-fail) meaning if a student sleeps over four hours a night they will fail the examinations. Another term used is "juken jigoku" (examination hell) to describe the extreme stress everyone (students, families, and schools) experiences in this trying rite of passage. Even non-religious families may express, "kurushii toki no kami danomi" (turning to religion in times of distress) for success in entrance examinations (Tanaka (ed.) 1990).

As a result of these pressures and competition, Japan created the "juku" (private tutoring examination school) to cope. Some are academic, tailored specifically to university entrance examinations; others are special interest (Tanaka (ed.) 1990). XYZ school was a special interest English cram school, as the goal there was to develop conversation skills, not directly focussing on entrance examinations.

The Japanese "Mombusho" (Ministry of Education) has tried to change the high school curriculum in order to develop English conversational skills. They have hired thousands of AETs (Assistant English Teachers) to introduce native English speakers into many but not all classrooms. Moreover, "Mombusho" tried to change the old curriculum from the traditional "grammar-translation" method focus toa more "communicative"-type approach. However there were some major problems which included: no needs analysis, or consultations with teachers and only "experts" made decisions. Many proposed changes were ignored by teachers because he all-important university entrance eaxminations remained the same and teahers were under pressure to teach "examination English" (wash-back effect). The examinations emphasise reading skills, translation, grammar and memorisation. The curriculum meets these demands, rather than top-down objectives (Lo Castro 1996). This influenced Lo Castro (1996) to state that the greatest motivation for Japanese high

school students learning English is to pass examinations (especially university entrance examinations).

**b) What Has Been Left Out**

Was Lo Castro's (1996) above assertion true for my class of adolescent learners? My students were unique in that were of high school age, attended high school during the day, but came to my lesson in the evening, once a week.

Assuming Lo Castro's (1996) assertion was true, should I have simply accomodated this motivation? I could have simply prepared them for the TOEIC (Test of English for International Communication) test, which was part of our curriculum. However, this test was in conflict with the goals of the course: it testa only two skills, listening and reading of the four major skill areas, omitting the two productive macroskills speaking and writing.

I felt that passing examinations was actually only part of my students' motivation for learning English. I proposed to examine more closely my students' points of view, from withi the context of our classroom.

**c) Conceptual Framework**

Recently the term, "learners' intrests and needs" has become somewhat of a buzzword. Unfortunately buzzword terms sometimes carry a negative connotation - implying only a passing fad, or dismissal as merely a current trend.

However, I feel learners' interests and needs are of utmost importance. Yalden (1987) asserted that a needs analysis is a crucial first step in developing a communicative syllabus. Berwick (19 ) explained that the importance of learners' interests and needs in TESOL mirrors their popularity in public and adult education. Needs based curricula have been in fashion for the past twenty years. Central characteristics include systematic assessment and consultation with learners (Berwick

19 ). I concentrated this study on the "felt" needs from learners, as opposed to the "perceived" needs from experts. Also, I used a "democratic", or learner-centred approach to needs analysis. This usually involves using consultations or interviews to accomodate individuals goals (Berwick 19 ).

Crookes (1993) outlines two kinds of action research. The first kind, or "teacher-research", is more simple and straightforward in nature. I conducted action research of the second kind in this study. It is more radical and progressive as it involves, "critical reflection on teaching and the sociopolitical context" (Crookes 1993;137). It is important and empowering because: 1) the results are relevant to taechers' needs; 2) it supports teacher reflection; and 3) it may encourage teachers to conduct other kinds of research, and 4) it is based in critical theory (Crookes 1993:137).

Mc Hugh (1989:299) suggests three cultural reasons why Japanese students of all ages are reluctant to speak up in oral-centred English classes: 1) traditional classes are teacher-centred with little interaction; 2) fear of making a mistake; and 3) upstaging classmates. There are cultural differences even in the meaning of "communication" itself. In Japan's hierarchial society; status, age and gender are crucial social variables (Lo Castro 1996:45).

I will examine McHugh's (1989) and Lo Castro's (1996) findings later,as I attempt to find correlations with my research findings.

**Research questions**

The aim of this action research is to answer two research questions:

1) What are my learners' interests and needs?

2) Can I use this information to develop their oral communication skills?

**Research Site and Participants**

The class consisted of eight members, who attended XYZ school's first year English course. However, seven members were in the first year of high school and one member was in the second year of high school. They all attended different high schools (seven pubilc and one private school). There were five boys and three girls of fiftee and sixteen years old. All members lead a typicall busy life. After attending high school, were involved in various clubs (sporting, singing, or music) anywhere from one to three hours, three to seven days per week. One student also attended an academic cram school once a week. They also had homework and studied for many tests.

Sequenced within their busy schedules, they also attended XYZ school's classes. We met once a week for two hours (6:00 to 8:00 p.m.) on Monday evenings. XYZ was a private English cram school (of a special interest type). Attendance was optional and expendable, unlike high school which was compulsory. Often if the students had a high school test they had to study for, they would miss a class.

Students and parents were very aware of the perceived differences between these two English learning contexts. The high school English curriculum (despite major efforts to change) was widely viewed as deficient in producing English-speaking students of a general high ability. This was part of the reason that schools such as XYZ could exist and stay in business. A significant reason why my students are here is because, "EFL students, such as those in Japan, seldom have chances to interact with Native English speakers outside the classroom" (McHugh 1989:295). This may have meant good business for my school, but it also meant my students have restricted chances to practice oral English with native speakers outside of class. This is very significant and our time together was precious because we had two hours per week together in class but we had one hundred and sixty six hours apart outside of class. We had to make the most of every moment and try to involve all mem-

bers. The big selling point of XYZ's lessons were that students would have an optimum of opportunities to communicate with a native speaker in a small class (in this case eight students) environment. The lesson's goals, foccussing on conversation skills, filled the demands of this niche market.

There appeared to be an enormous gap between the student's high school and XYZ English curriculums. The students were most aware of this, as they were the ones who learnt English, with their totally opposed goals in both environments. The strain of high school could be physically seen when they came into class in the evening, usually tired, sleepy and/or hungry, after finishing a hard day at high school, followed by club activities and having homework to look foward to when they arrived home after our class.

The curriculum covered all four skill areas: speaking, listening, reading and writing, with an emphasis on speaking. The weekly two hour class was divided into four sections:

1) TOEIC practice tests (30 minutes)
2) textbook "East West 1" (30 to 40 minutes)
3) free talk (10 to 15 minutes)
4) workshop - games, projects (35 to 50 minutes)

The suggested order, emphasis and times came from XYZ's teacher manual. However, these order, emphasis and time suggestions were suggestions only as teachers had a free reign to change these as they saw fit. For example, in our class we had more emphasis on free talk (which started the class) and lasted for about 30 to 40 minutes, with less emphasis on "EastWest 1" textbook (Graves and Rein, 1989) as it was very out of date, designed for a different market (immigrants to the U.S.A.) and therefore not interesting or motivational for my students. The students were encouraged to attend three special events during the year where they

could interact with different native speaker guests. Also there was an opportunity for them to attend an "all-English" homestay (for example three weeks during summer in Vancouver, Canada).

**Research Methods**

Research was conducted in this action research study using informal group and individual inteviews with two students, observing class interactions, and collecting documents (journals).

In the group interviews, permission was asked and gained due to ethical concerns, to tape record two thirty minute sessions with the students. In progress of the individual interviews, rough notes were taken by hand. While observing the class interactions, I took notes in a file of index cards with a student name index, similar to a telephone/address file, for ease of recording and reference (please look at Davies Samway, 1994, for more recording ideas). Student's journals were collected as yet another valuable input for research.

Regarding individual interviews, we already had a form of this called, "Academic Advising." It consisted of the individual students meeting an administrative staff member and myself. However it only happened once a year and was somewhat biased. It is biased in that even though it is supposed to be informal, the student's responses are often very reserved, as they are interacting with authorities/experts inan "us and them" situation. In addition to academic advising, I conducted informal interviews with two students outside of class. Regarding student journals, the students are encouraged by me to write a journal everyweek. The subject matter is free choice, however I was very interested to read their reponses about our class and their English learning experiences in general.

**Research Findings**

After interviewing, observing and collecting documents, some interesting findings were discovered. We will examine the themes discovered from the first interviews, observations, second interviews and documents (student's written journals).

Both styles of interviews, (group and individuals) examined the learner's interests and needs. My adolescent student's greatest motivation for learning English was not passing examinations as suggested by Lo Castro (1996). My student's greatest motivation for learning English was to interact with a native speaker and improve their speaking abilities. My learner's intersts and needs were further expressed by their desires of how they would like to learn. Suggestions for possible future lessons included more ephasis on playing English games, singing more English songs (with me accompanying on guitar), watching more English videos, reading more short stories, having more discussions on a theme and holding an all-English camping trip.

These were valued ideas and I started to implement many of them (sometimes combining ideas) into our curriculum. For example, video and short stories have been combined by studying a scene out of a screenplay book and then watching that part of the video. To combine another area, we then had a discussion on a theme, for example, about the characters, the dialogue, or speculated as to what might happen next. The students found it difficult and challenging, though above all else, interesting. In the future, we made a plan to try again with probably a simpler video. Observing and recording the free talk (introduction of class) was very revealing. In this section of class, we sit at a round table, relax and catch up on the week's events, a type of "talking circle"(Ernst 1994). I could observe some curious patterns in behaviour occurring. The eight students were assuming three distinct and different roles; one a translator, one assertive questioner, and six almost passive

answerers. A strange phenomenon indeed.

Now let's examine the student's assumed roles more closely. The translator is a boy called Yuji. Yuji is different from the other students in that he is the only one in the second year of high school. This makes him everyone's, "senpai" (senior) above the rest of the, "kohai" (juniors) regardless of the fact that they all attend different high schools (translations from Shogakukan Progressive Japanese-English Dictionary, 1993, 2nd. ed.). Yuji was therefore in a position of respect and superiority, as he has more experience than the others, related to age and more importantly, grade (second year over first year). To add more kudos to his already inflated status, he attended a very good high school with ambitions to enter into the one of the top six universities in Japan and become an ambassador in the future (as he explained in the group interview). Usually in free talk, the majority of the students are alternatively quiet and speak simple English sentences, often very self-consciously. However, if they attempted to say something a little more difficult, often they would whisper to Yuji in Japanese, he tells them the sentence in English and then they would repeat it to the group. Quite probably this was a product of the grammar-translation method emphasis used in high school. Even though we had an all-English policy in class, the students (especially "kohai" juniors) didn't want to make a mistake at any cost. These findings supported McHugh's (1989) arguments (first factor: traditional classes are teacher-centred, with little interaction and second factor: fear of making a mistake) as to why students are reluctant to speak up in oral-centred classes, as outlined earlier in the Conceptual Framework of this paper.

One of the girls, Junko, assumed the role of the assertive questioner. As a response to my questions, "What's new?" or "Any questions,?" she always actively responded. In one way this was good, but on the other hand it was a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy where both the students and myself expected her to speak out

every time while the others stayed relatively quiet.

The rest of the students usually assumed the role of passive answerers to questions asked by myself, Junko, or Yuji (when he was prompted into it). The sempai/kohai power relationship was clearly in force here.

In the second group interview session, we talked about the student's English learning experiences. In particular, we discussed McHugh"s (1989:299) suggestion of three cultural reasons why Japanese students of all ages, are reluctant to speak up in oral-centred English classes. The students agreed with the reasons, as presented ny McHugh: 1) traditional classes are teacher-centred, with little interaction; 2) fear of making a mistake; 3) upstaging classmates. However, my students wanted to add three more reasons: 4) little chance of communication with native speakers of English and what opportunity they do have was not used effectively; 5) adequate vocabulary was acquired, but not sure how to use it; and importantly, 6) foreign communication culture (which includes gestures, body language, facial expressions and jokes) is not often taught.Student's writing of journals was another method of gaining valuable findings. Students were the most aware of the advantages and disadvantages of their two very different English curriculums they had to live in both worlds.

**Conclusions**

I will now answer my research questions, 1) What are my learner's interests and needs? and 2) Can I use this informationto develop their oral communication skills?, summarise my findings and suggest ow they contribute to student motivation, teaching practices and curriculum development.

My learner's interests and needs were shown by their primary motivation for learning English. They needed to increase their English oral communication abilities by interacting with a native speaker. They all expressed that this would be of

great importance in their future. Also, they indicated a need to learn in a way that centres on interests. This included the use of more English games, songs, videos, short stories, discussions on a theme and a camp. Using this information was highly motivational and empowering for the students. The students felt they had valuable input to contribute to their own learning.

I used this information to try developing their oral communication skills. As shown in the Research Findings section, I implemented many of the ideas into our lessons. A good reference book I found for games was, "Keep Talking" by Kippel (1984). A show and tell session at the start of some classes was another useful idea suggested by a colleague.

However there are several areas of conflict which influence our class. One is the influence of the powerful grammar-translation method emphasis of high school. The wash-back effect from examinations is in conflict with the communicative approach proposals. The second area of conflict is the one experienced when trying to teach students who are involved with both of these curriculums (see McHugh and Stafford 19 ). A third and very significant area of conflict exists within XYZ's curriculum and involves an incongruent test. The TOEIC test was inappropriate for adolescent Japanese learners and it was in conflict with the goals of the course. TOEIC was developed to test adult"s business English ability so Japanese companies could make personnel decisions. TOEIC tests, or values, only listening and reading skills. Everthing we do not test, (that is, speaking and writing in TOEIC's case) appears unimportant and lacking in value (Fanselow 1987). Last but not least, these Japanese high school students already had enough stress from existing examinations. I recommended that the TOEIC test should be de-emphasised in our curriculum. Unfortunately many teachers and students view the TOEIC and the textbook as necessary evils. I disagreed with necessary, but had to agree with evil for our learners. Alternatives to TOEIC include: making our own tests, observing and

continuous assessment (Heaton 1990) which eliminates the stress of tests by collecting data over a long period of time.

The out of date and out of place textbook, "EastWest 1" (1989) by Graves and Rein, was replaced by, "New Interchange 1" (Richards, Hull and Proctor, 1997). Although the final decision on the textbook was made by experts in our curriculum, (administrative staff and selected teachers) the new textbook seemed at that time at least up to date, relevant and motivational for the students. As there are no perfect textbooks in existence, I supplemented the textbook with additional materials.

Here are nine recommended questions teachers may ask themselves after reading my study:

1) What are my learner's interests and needs?
2) What are the goals of my curriculum?
3) Do my students learn English in another curriculum? If yes, how?
4) What are my student's learning expectations/limitations/reluctances?
5) What is the status, age, gender and grade (year level) of my students?
6) Is there a suggested order/emphasis/time for each curriculum component? Any alternatives?
7) If there is an examination present in my curriculum, what does it really test (value) and what does it not test (not value)? Any alternatives?
8) If there is a textbook present in my curriculum, what does it emphasise? Any alternatives?
9) Am I willing to change?

In the end, it all comes down to one word which many people fear but would most probably benefit from: change. It is common sense that everyone must change to grow and learn. Further, everyone and everything (students, teachers, administrators, curriculums, schools and societies) must change to genuinely develop ado-

lescent Japanese student's oral abilities to the fullest extent. I started a ball rolling in my curriculum and I hope this may have achieved a domino-effect for more change at a later date. As Faselow (1987) pointed out inthe title of his book, sometimes we have to break the rules to really achieve anything.

Limitations of my study included that I was a novice action researcher and the short time frame involved (conducted over about 3 months). Further limitations included he individualistic nature of my study, as opposed to the ideal of collaborative study (Crookes 1993). However, because of my working conditions, (no other teachers teaching when I taught) collaborative study was impossible. On the other hand, Fanselow (1987) advocates observation of a purely individualistic nature because ultimately we have only ourselves to rely upon. Rely upon yourself and try action research for yourself, as well as those who surround you. It is both highly beneficial and recommended for everyone.

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